



Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—Lib) (11.59 am): This morning I rise to draw the attention of this House to mounting concerns over the stream of issues that keep bobbing up within the Department of Child Safety. The department of families brought so much shame on the Beattie government that it deemed the safety of children an issue important enough to be the trigger for the election in 2004. Three years have now passed since the renaming and reformation of this portfolio which promises to protect children. Granted, there have been significant reforms. However, there is something very unsettling about the minister's premature gloating.

On 22 March this year the minister boasted of the government's implementation of all 110 recommendations, exactly three years to the day after her government received the Peter Forster blueprint for desperately needed reforms for a grossly neglected system. However, on 15 April news broke about major failures in the long-awaited integrated client management system for child protection, with 2,440 reported issues in less than one month of operation. This computer system was heralded by the government as a world first, paving the way by integrating information to assist decision-making processes for individual case management for children under the care or attention of the department.

I am gravely concerned about reports that cases of alleged abuse have been mistakenly closed, placing children at serious risk of sexual harm or abuse in greater danger by this malfunction of the system and its processes. Vital information has also allegedly been lost or attached incorrectly to other files, resulting in a flawed decision-making process. It is essential that all relevant information is assessed and this is critical in the domain of Child Safety. The ICMS was meant to be operational on 30 June 2006. It was delayed until November 2006 and further postponed until March 2007. After such excessive delay and pilot testing under the guise of getting the system right, it is inexcusable for the level of problems experienced.

Child Safety case loads is another area of disquiet and deserving of urgent attention and was the topic of my question on notice No. 372, which I asked on 8 March this year. The aim for case loads was to reduce them to 15. Yet from the answer provided to my question, there is direct evidence that out of the 34 Child Safety service centres within this state, this target has been achieved in only one centre, that being Redlands. Statistically, that means that 97 per cent of these centres are overburdened and are not operating effectively in the best interests of the children they are meant to protect. After examining the case loads across the state, over 80 per cent of centres were found to bear case loads greater than 120 per cent of what is recommended and 23 per cent had case loads exceeding 150 per cent. Even more disturbing are revelations that the areas of South Burnett, Mackay, Atherton, Goodna, Ipswich, Woodridge, Logan Central and Loganlea are each managing case loads that are rapidly approaching double the number that they should be handling. The minister has made media statements claiming a tick for reducing case loads as per the CMC recommendations. Whilst there has been a big step in the right direction, realistically the government has not achieved all that it could.

The loss of experienced workers from the department is another matter that needs to be addressed without further delay, with about 75 per cent of permanent separations resulting from staff resigning from

the department. Concerns raised by staff must be supported by the government and acted upon to better assist them in tackling the difficult tasks, heart-wrenching situations and tough decisions that they face on a daily basis.

Results from the recent Child Safety staff survey certainly reflect a demonstration of creative reporting. It is what is not said that speaks volumes. There are large gaps in the survey, which show that staff refused to answer whether they felt that the department had improved because they were not given the option to disagree with the statement. By not allowing this option, we are left with a flawed presentation of the responses and an incomplete picture of the facts—a picture that permits the government to crow about the figures that show only agreement and support the department's focus.

In order to be transparent and accountable, the department should have given staff the opportunity to openly disagree. The survey should have invited all staff to partake in it, not just a sample of staff. A critical point to note is that less than 30 per cent of staff actually agreed that the department has made significant progress in its ability to address the complex needs of children who come into contact with the child protection system. Sadly, an increasing number of people in today's society either tolerate or turn a blind eye to child abuse and the growing trend of neglect. We have an obligation to curb this trend by implementing a host of programs in our communities to provide support for parents.

The minister, together with the whole Beattie government, also has an obligation to the children of Queensland to do everything in her power to protect them and to make sure that staff are well equipped to handle their roles, with manageable case loads and systems that are properly tested for efficiency and safety. I hope the minister comes back from America with some proven ideas to help address this situation so that Queensland children can feel safe.

Time expired.